

Honors and Institutional Transformation

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Honors colleges and programs often evolve in response to a mandate from boards of regents or trustees. Such mandates can lead to new or accelerated change within the institution, change that in many cases is linked to and represented by honors. Such has been the case at Western Kentucky University (WKU), where the honors program has played a key role in enhancing the national visibility and prestige of the institution.

I was hired by the Board of Regents in 1997 with a mandate to enact a “fundamental transformation” of WKU. It became clear to me that the honors program could play a major role in achieving the Board’s mandate, and eight years later, in April 2005, we created the position of full-time director of the honors program to place a strong focus on honors education. I believed that a serious honors program could raise WKU’s national profile while helping with recruiting, creating a destination point for gifted and high-ability students, improving the academic climate on campus, and increasing the institution’s overall reputation and prestige. I wanted an honors program that would play

a principal role in achieving our vision of WKU as a leading American university with international reach.

It has been ten years since we hired Craig T. Cobane as Executive Director and made the honors program an institutional priority. The program became an honors college in 2007, and it has become a centerpiece of academic transformation at WKU. Although the transformation is ongoing, decadal data demonstrate that the Honors College at WKU has been a primary driver in improving both the overall academic caliber of the undergraduate population and the institution's statewide and national reputation.

In 2005–2006, only about two hundred students were active in the honors program, and only ten graduated. Today, the honors college has over 1,350 scholars, and two hundred graduated last year. This growth resulted in large part from our decision to invest in honors and increase opportunities for scholars. The investment has been substantial, but the return has been worth it. The past decade's investment has included hiring tenure-eligible honors faculty and specialized staff, creating buy-out funds for honors courses, and designating honors-only residence halls. Additional resources enabled the honors college to create a freestanding Office of Scholar Development and a Chinese Flagship Program while also playing a leading role in bringing Kentucky's first Confucius Institute to WKU. These investments have allowed the college to recruit the best and brightest and to provide them the academic and intellectual opportunity to earn the nation's top competitive scholarships. The honors college is doing exactly what we had envisioned: it is increasing the quality of students and improving the institution's reputation within the state and nationally.

ACADEMIC QUALITY

One of the primary reasons we invested in honors education was to attract a greater number of high-quality students to WKU. The plan was to increase the number of honors-eligible students on campus, thus helping to improve the overall intellectual climate on campus and the institution's prestige and reputation. The quality of students can be measured in a number of ways, one of which is ACT/SAT scores. At many institutions, average national scores have been the primary, albeit somewhat controversial, way of assessing the academic quality of students. Another factor is the recruitment of graduates from outstanding high schools. Finally, the number of students applying for the institution's top scholarships can serve as a proxy to show an increase in high-ability students. WKU has excelled in all three measurements.

INCREASE IN ACT/SAT AVERAGES

In addition to the significant growth of the honors college in numbers of students this past decade, WKU has also seen an equally impressive improvement in the average ACT/SAT of incoming honors scholars (27/1220 to 30.24/1350). The 2005 average scores for the 161 incoming first-year honors scholars was at the 85th percentile, and by 2015 it improved to the 96th percentile, with a 100% larger cohort. Not only has honors grown considerably, in both numbers and quality, but the scores of students not in the college have also improved significantly—further evidence that the honors college is having a positive impact on WKU’s academic reputation and attracting more high-achieving students to the university.

The honors college’s success in recruiting graduates from the Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science (according to *Newsweek Magazine/The Daily Beast*, the nation’s number one high school for the past three years) is additional evidence that the investment in the college is working. During its first six years (2007 to 2013), more Gatton Academy graduates have matriculated to WKU than any other university.

INCREASED PRESTIGE AS MEASURED BY SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS

As the Honors College at WKU has grown, it has seen significant increases in 1) the number of students applying for WKU’s top merit-based scholarships, 2) the number of students applying for merit-based scholarships targeted at underrepresented groups, and 3) the percentage of applicants accepting scholarships and matriculating at WKU.

In the past ten years the number of students applying for the top three merit-based scholarships has grown by 200% with an almost 160% percent growth in acceptances. A similar analysis of the top three scholarships for underrepresented groups shows that the number of applications has grown by over 310%, and acceptances have increased by 278%.

While scholarship application/acceptance is not a perfect proxy for institutional prestige/reputation, the substantial growth in the number of applicants for top scholarships is a strong indicator that our strategy is working and that the university is increasingly becoming a destination point for academically high-achieving students.

ACADEMIC IMPROVEMENT INSTITUTION-WIDE

Investment in honors education has also helped increase the overall number of high-quality non-honors students at WKU. Our strategy was that a successful honors college would attract outstanding students. The strategy has paid off, and in the past ten years the institution has seen a 65% increase in students with ACT/SAT scores of 25/1340 or higher. This growth in high-ability students is especially impressive because it came at a time when the overall enrollment of the university grew by only 10%. We have thus been able to use the honors college as a vehicle to not only improve the institution but especially to enhance our academic reputation.

NATIONALLY COMPETITIVE SCHOLARSHIPS AND INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY

Another variable used to measure academic quality is success with nationally competitive scholarships. Over the past decade, because of a conscious investment in promoting these scholarships, WKU has experienced a substantial increase in the number of students applying for and receiving nationally competitive awards, improving our overall reputation both regionally and nationally.

WKU had no real “national scholarship” culture in 2005. A couple of students would apply annually with little success, so, in support of the honors college, we created the campus-wide Office of Scholar Development (OSD) in 2006. Since that time, growth of applications and successes has been dramatic. This past year, 42 of the over 120 students who applied for nationally competitive scholarships earned recognition. Furthermore, although the majority of applicants are members of the honors college, the number of non-honors students applying is substantial and growing.

This trend is a positive sign of change in the campus culture. In my early years at WKU, most of our students and many of our faculty were skeptical about national scholarship opportunities. As a result of our investments, WKU is now known in Kentucky, and increasingly nationally, for success with national awards. Earlier this year, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* recognized WKU for success in the J. William Fulbright competition for the second time in the past four years. In 2014, WKU was tied for third in the nation among master’s comprehensive institutions in Fulbright production. Additionally, John Willingham, the editor of *A Review of Fifty Public Honors*

Program (2014), in referencing WKU's success with STEM-related nationally competitive scholarships, stated: "Few national universities, public or private, have a better record during the period" (from 2008–2014). In short, because of a focus on and investment in honors education, WKU is enjoying increased positive national recognition. These types of validations and the perceptions they create of our academic excellence are critical in helping me talk about the value of the WKU experience to donors, alumni, state legislators, and other external constituencies.

GROWTH IN STUDY ABROAD PARTICIPATION

My decision to invest in honors education has also helped grow WKU's participation in study abroad, which has led to additional statewide and national recognition. Over the past decade, the Honors College at WKU has played a leading role in creating new study abroad opportunities and partnerships, providing exemplars of the value of international education and popularizing study abroad. As a result, the number of WKU students studying abroad has grown from fewer than 150 in 2005 to 544. WKU now ranks twenty-third in the nation for total students studying abroad and fourteenth for student participation in short-term programs among master's institutions. Of the students who studied abroad in 2013–2014, nearly forty percent were members of the honors college. In fact, more of our honors students study abroad annually than the entire institution produced in 2005. Due to this growth, WKU is the only public university in Kentucky ranked by IIE in the top forty nationally, and increasingly I hear from prospective students, their families, alumni, and state legislators that WKU is considered the "study abroad" university in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

CONCLUSION

Our investment in honors education over the past decade has not only enhanced the Honors College at WKU but improved the academic quality of the university. It has made the institution stronger, helped attract more outstanding faculty, and improved the intellectual climate on campus. Additionally, the increased number of high-ability students applying and matriculating at WKU has led to more students studying abroad and earning nationally competitive scholarships. As a result, during the past ten years I have witnessed WKU's statewide and national academic reputation increase dramatically. In short, my decision to invest in honors education has been an

undeniable success and has helped transform the academic culture at WKU, moving the institution closer to fulfilling our vision of becoming a leading American university with international reach.

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